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ABSTRACT

Noting that many students appear to lack the skills necessary for composing an academic paper, this paper contends that such students may possess a field dependent cognitive style (termed "holistic") that is at odds with the needs and expectations of the college world's field independent cognitive style. Pointing out that cognitive style permeates all aspects of behavior, including language, the paper then discusses three areas of language differences indicative of holistic students that are of interest to teachers of composition: hierarchical classification (holistic students do not perceive hierarchical differences and therefore have difficulty with the inductive and deductive patterns of argument often used for essay or term paper development), distance (holistic students do not separate themselves from others and therefore have problems with the standard objective point-of-view required in most formal papers), and transitional features (holistic thinkers tend not to use details and not to analyze and therefore are more likely than analytical thinkers to use transitional features). The discussion also provides suggestions for composition teachers to use in handling these differences. The paper concludes that small classes and individual attention from the instructor may be the most effective ways to work with such students. (FL)

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THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION AND DIFFERENT COGNITIVE STYLES

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The skills necessary for composing an academic paper may not be as easily learned by one group of students as by another. Some students, for instance, outline after the composition is completed; others do not adequately develop their ideas; still others use fallacious - to the instructor - arguments. In addition, there are students whose diction is not just improper, but is composed of strange malapropisms and hypercorrections. Moreover, there is a large group of students who do not analyze or explicate a story but merely summarize, despite instruction and demonstration of techniques of literary analysis and literary criticism. The rhetorical deviations from the desired may be the result of a cognitive style at odds with the needs and expectations of the academic community : a holistic, sometimes called field dependent - style that is the antithesis of the analytic, sometimes called field independent, style of the world of higher learning.

While the research on cognitive style points to a continuum from holistic to analytic style, some individuals and cultural groups tend to fall at an extreme end of the continuum, and cognitive preference tends to be stable over life unless there is strong desire and instructions for change. Holistic students have special problems in the school setting, and these problems can escalate as the student goes into higher education. Holistic style can be a particular handicap for the university student or for the student in the academic or transfer tract of a community college. Cognitive style permeates all aspects of behavior, including language. Three areas of language difference that are of interest to the teacher of composition will be discussed in detail here, and some suggestions will be made for handling these differences in teaching writing. The areas to be discussed are classification, distance, and transitional features.

CLASSIFICATION

One of the most important cognitive skills in higher study is hierarchical classification. The concept of classification is the basis for understanding such diverse topics as the theory of evolution, the structure of certain governments, the organization of an outline. Holistic persons tend not to classify in the accepted sense of the term. The psychologists Luria and Vygotsky were two of the first researchers to examine the differences in organization of thought by peoples of different cultural groups. In the 1920's, in a remote Asian village, Luria found that the subjects, who were from a practical, non-technological, rural society, grouped items according to practical, everyday use. Even demonstrations of hierarchical classification failed to produce a change because the villagers thought the model was foolish - i.e. of no practical value. Therefore, the villagers would classify an ax, a log, and a saw together because the ax is used to cut down a tree, and the resulting log is then sawed for wood. Grouping several items under the general term of tools, for instance, was rejected. (Luria, 1976)

Because holistic students do not perceive hierarchical differences, they tend to see everything as "equal". Rather than placing objects under a general class heading, holistic students may tend to describe the item if they do not group according to use as above. On a classroom exercise designed to test student classification skills, students were given a middle term and asked to identify a more general and a more specific term. For the item street, for example, a student gave 7th for specific and dirty for general; for flower, a student gave pretty for specific and tall for general. Classification requires labeling and, often, use of synonyms. Holistic thinkers use few synonyms and few labels. (See Cohen, 1969; Cooper, 1979a)

In an article for an NCTE publication, Odell (1977) identified linguistic cues to classification. Using Odell as a guide, a study of the papers of holistic and analytic students at the University of the District of Columbia was conducted. Holistic students used significantly fewer classification features than analytic students. In teaching outlining to such students and in teaching classification as a method of development of compositions, the English teacher must go beyond most available texts and focus first on the concept of classification. Because holistic students are socially oriented and because they are also visually oriented, (See Cooper, 1979; Matthews, 1977; Witkin, et. al., 1977, for instance) a visual, social exercise is an effective. In one college class, for instance, six students were chosen at random to come to the front of the classroom. Classmates were then asked to select the tallest, the next tallest, etc. and then to decide where they - the remaining students - would fit, in the "tall","average", or "short" group. Next, students were grouped in a slightly more abstract manner, on style of dress: informal, businesslike, "dressy"; the students chose the categories based upon descriptions of those they saw before them and then moved to finding a general term to cover similarly dressed students. Because holistic students are very interested in matters of dress and appearance, this exercise was particularly good for getting the students to analyze in detail because they attended to fine distinctions when asked to do so. The teacher can after several visual exercises, designed to move from a social focus to more abstract focuses, move to a writtenexercise of the type mentioned previously, in which the student is given terms, again moving from the concrete - which the holistic student is more comfortable with - to the abstract. Several trials and demonstrations will be

needed before most holistic students grasp the idea because it is concept formation and not just organizational patterning that they are engaged in.

Classification of everything as "equal" impacts upon the use of inductive and deductive patterns of argument for essay or term paper development. Holistic students tend not to argue "logically" according to these traditional forms. When given the inductive process, an attempt at argument may be: My English teacher is too strict; therefore, all English teachers are too strict. When everything is seen as equal, there is no need for extensive sampling before arriving at a conclusion. Following such reasoning, the student may arrive at many faulty generalizations that may form major premises for faulty syllogisms in deductive argument. Again, the student must be given exercises to focus upon the concept of classification, and in this case, to focus on differences - especially subtle differences - between items.

As far as outlining is concerned, many students claim that they can not outline, while others have to write the essay first. For those that "can not" outline, the suggested types of classification exercises can lead into exercises in outlining. For those who write the outline after the essay, individual conferences should perhaps focus on:(a) the errors in organization that result from not having a plan and the concept of outlining , or, if the essay is well-written, (b) the underlying mental outline that the student probably had by going over step by step how the student in question handles the composing process and how the paper could be even better - for instance, avoiding having to rewrite to add a forgotton or additional thought - by outlining before writing. Individual, personal contact is important to holistic thinkers, and the teacher may accomplish more with some students in individual conferences. On the other hand, such thinkers do not like

to be completely on their own, so while an analytic thinker can be given individual assignments and be left to complete them, the holistic thinker generally requires continuing contact with and encouragement from the instructor and/or his peers. (See, for instance, Ramírez and Castañeda, 1974).

DISTANCE

Academic papers generally require an objective point-of-view. Such a view point requires distance : differentiation of the self from others, of subjective from objective. (See Siegel, 1970) Holistic thinkers do not separate self from others; they tend toward group involvement. The lack of distance is apparant in the writing of such thinkers and may be expressed in different ways. In the 1979 study previously mentioned (Cooper), distance was measured by use of the third person point of view. Lack of distance was expressed most often by use of second person. Some linguists and educators call this the impersonal you ; however, it is not "impersonal" at all but rather is a subconscious expression of the desire for human contact. Many traditional cultures that followed an oral historical and literary tradition, reflect the importance of audience interaction; this same time of desire for interaction is expressed in use of you in situations where the academically preferred form would be he or even the more impersonal one. In the 1979 study, holistic thinkers used very little distance in their papers; analytic thinkers used significantly more distance in their papers.

Instructing students to write in third person is not enough to change the habit in holistic thinkers. The language expression of distance is reflective of a whole set of distancing behaviors. Perhaps, and such exercises may take a great deal of time, the instructor could begin again with social, visual exercises and then move to language practice.

Again, the student must move to the more familiar concrete examples to the abstract in order to grasp the concept. Writing exercises could move from direct appeal writing such as poster copy urging students to vote in a student council election to an editorial urging the vote to a first person essay on experiences in voting in campus elections to a third person essay on a recent campus election to a more removed third person essay on the importance of voting in a democratic society.

TRANSITIONAL FEATURES

One language area that other researchers have not generally examined specifically in relation to cognitive style is the use of "transitional features"; hypercorrections and malapropisms that seemingly result when a user of a nonstandard dialect who is a holistic thinker or one who is adding unfamiliar words to his vocabulary - again, a holistic thinker - does not attend to all the configuration and usage features of the new form.

In a 1979 study of composition papers (Cooper), it was found that holistic thinkers used significantly more transitional features than did analytic thinkers. One interesting example is the use of 's for s plural on nouns. Some nonstandard dialects do not mark plurals nor do they mark possessives. In learning to mark these forms, the holistic thinker hypercorrects his writing to put the 's on noun plurals; for example, Student's are interested in sports. An interesting malapropism found in one of the papers was aroundings for surroundings. Holistic thinkers tend not to attend to details, not to analyze,; thus, they are more likely than analytic thinkers to use transitional features.

In working with those students that have a high incidence of transitional features in their written work, the first step is to develop their attention to details. Hidden word puzzles of the type found in many crossword puzzle magazines are an effective exercise. Some teachers have found that contrastive analysis drills help with grammatical markers; for instance,, the teacher might have an oral drill in which the unmarked plural is given and the students anwser with the marked form, or the teacher might present a singular and the students the plural; the oral drill is followed with the written drill. A contrast of possessives and noun plurals would perhaps be effective. Students could then move to correcting errors in sentences and then in paragraphs and then in whole essays. Some workbooks contain these "proofreading" exercises. Because the tendency to focus on the whole rather than the parts is indicative of the holistic students' cognitive style, the exercises must proceed slowly from individual words to essays because the students' perception is being trained; they are not merely learning a rule. Vocabulary drills might focus on the different environments of the different parts of speech formed from a common root. Phonological drills might be helpful in focusing on spelling, on analyzing the parts of a word. Often, it is necessary to set aside tutorial time to work with students individually on attention problems. An examination and adaptation of elementary school reading and writing materials will yeild many ideas of use to the teacher of college composition to holistic students. Such materials must, of course, be modified to suit young adult and adult interest.

Other language features not discussed in detail here are related to cognitive style and may signal a need for teaching of cognitive concepts and focusing of perception rather than mere teaching and practice of rules.

The "restricted code" identified by linguistic researchers such as Labov (1972), for example, is a characteristic of holistic thinking and might be expressed in inadequate development of the body of an essay. Extensive use of imagery (c.f. Cooper, 1979a; Matthews, 1977) has also been identified as a cognitive style preference of holistic thinkers. Use of passive voice, however, which shows a non-human involvement, might indicate analytic thinking. English teachers often discourage extensive use of the passive. Cohen (1969) identifies several features; others need to be investigated.

In addition, the research on cognitive style differences suggests that small classes and more individual attention may be necessary for the composition teacher to apply the most effective methods of working with holistic thinkers. The holistic thinker responds to personal attention from the instructor, constant reinforcement, and an environment structured by the teacher; on the other hand, the holistic thinker needs to be gradually moved to more analytic thinking in order to accomplish many of the tasks involved in mastering the writing of academic essays and research papers, and the teacher must have time to select, test, and modify approaches to meet this need.

GLOSSARY

Abstract thinking, theoretical, detached thinking; thinking disassociated from any specific instance. See field independent.

Analytic thinking, breaking down of an idea, situation, etc. into its component parts and determining the relationships of the parts to the whole and to each other. See field independent.

Cognitive style, in regard to FD or FI style, this relates to way of perceiving and relating to the world in thought processes; conceptual style; thinking style.

Classification, the manner in which people, actions, feeling, or ideas can be labeled or compared to other things; identification of similarities, hierarchical sorting.

Concrete thinking, use of real things, objects from actual experience in formation of images, explanations, etc., a practical as opposed to theoretical approach to ideas. See field dependent.

Contrast, what an item is not; identification of differences; awareness of disparity.

Dialect interference, intrusion of a person's spoken dialect into his writing; for example, the speaker who does not pronounce a terminal s in he comes will write he come.

Distance, (in writing) an impersonal, objective approach to a subject as contrasted with a personal, subjective approach. Use of the third person objective point of view rather than first or second person. Point of view is an important measure of distance, but it is not the only measure. For instance, use of this in place of the or a, as is done by some speakers, is indicative of lack of distance.

Field dependent, cognitive style characterized by relating to the field (environment) as a whole; the FD thinker is socially oriented; concerns are practical and personal in relation to the social group, also known as field sensitivity, relational thinking, holistic or wholistic thinking, concrete thinking, situational thinking, gestalt thinking, or global thinking.

Field independent (FI), cognitive style characterized by analysis and structuring of the field (environment); focusing on part of a field as discrete from its surroundings; task orientation; also known as abstract thinking, analytic thinking.

Field sensitivity, attentive to and easily distracted by the

environment; socially oriented. See field dependent.

Gestalt thinking, holistic approach to environment; see field dependent.

Global thinking, wholistic thinking; see field dependent.

Holistic thinking, (wholistic), relating to the environment; as a whole; field dependent.

Malapropism, a term from the character Mrs. Malaprop in R. B. Sheridan's comedy The Rivals. Mrs. Malaprop was noted for her misuse of words. The term is applied to a blunder, usually humourous, misapplication of a word sounding somewhat like the one intended but ludicrously wrong in the context. Sometimes a completely new word is coined. For the purposes of the present study, semantic and usage misapplications are included.

Mediating responses, perceptual and thinking processes that intervene between the stimulus and the response to a situation, breaking down an idea into its components (analysis) can be a mediating response.

Perception, the definition for perception is a specialized one which forms the base for the theory of FD and FI styles based on perceptual differences. The definition is given by Luria (1976); a complex process involving complex orienting activity; a probabilistic structure; an analysis and synthesis of perceived features, and a decision-making process; a process structurally similar to the processes underlying more complex cognitive activities; a complex cognitive activity employing auxilliary devices and involving the intimate participation of language. Perception depends on historically established human practices that can alter the system of codes used to process incoming information and can influence the decision assigning the perceived objects to appropriate categories.

Relational thinking, perceiving practical, concrete connections between situations, ideas, etc.; see field dependent.

Situational thinking, explanation of environment through reference to concrete experiences; see field dependent.

Transitional feature, generally a hypercorrection or a malapropism; any language feature that comes about as a result of incorrect focus of attention in the transition from an unlearned to a learned style of language, including the acquisition of unfamiliar vocabulary items.

Wholistic thinking, see holistic thinking and field dependent.

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